

CUBA

Serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba despite some improvements. Violations by the Cuban government include: detention, sporadic arrests, and harassment of clergy and religious leaders affiliated with unregistered religious groups. The Cuban government also controls and monitors religious belief and practices through surveillance, infiltration, and legal restrictions prohibiting religious communities from operating without government permission. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Cuba on its Watch List in 2011. Cuba has been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2004.

BACKGROUND

Overall, the government of Cuba continues to have a poor record on human rights. The government tightly controls some religious practices including by: arresting, imprisoning, harassing, and threatening religious leaders who have called for increased separation of church and state, and whose denominations have withdrawn from the state-affiliated Cuban Council of Churches or caught the government's attention because of their large size. While the Cuban government seeks to project an image of respect for the right to religious freedom, state authorities view some religious organizations as threats to the government's legitimacy. Nevertheless, there were positive developments and improvements in the status of religious freedom in Cuba for the majority of religious denominations, particularly for the Catholic Church, which had a leading role in the release of more than 100 political prisoners in the last year. The Obama Administration in early 2011 continued to make it easier both for American religious groups to travel to Cuba and for U.S. remittances to be sent to religious communities on the island.

The Cuban government largely controls religious denominations through its surveillance and harassment of religious leaders and its administration of registration requirements. The government requires churches and other religious groups to register with the relevant provincial office of the Registry of Associations within the Ministry of Justice. Registration permits religious leaders to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply for travel abroad for religious purposes. The registration process is invasive, requiring religious communities to identify funding sources and locations for activities. After submitting an application, the government then certifies if that community is duplicating the activities of other registered religious communities.

The government also restricts religious practices by: not permitting the construction or repair of houses of worship; denying access to state media and exit visas; requiring the registration of publications; limiting the entry of foreign religious workers; denying Internet access to religious organizations; denying religious literature, such as Bibles, to persons in prison; denying permission to hold processions or events outside religious buildings; and discriminating on the basis of religion in the area of employment. Reportedly, some converts experience job discrimination. Converts are encouraged to "retire," or are not given promotions or pay raises, and excluded from work functions or meetings because colleagues no longer consider them "trustworthy."

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Over the last year, while most religious denominations experienced improvements, the Cuban government continued to direct activities against religious leaders who withdrew their denominations from the government-recognized Protestant umbrella group, the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), who criticized the government's interference in their churches, or whose churches were unregistered.

Arrests of Religious Leaders: The Cuban government continues to direct activities against leaders of denominations that are not part of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). An evangelical Christian pastor remains under house arrest and continues to await a trial on an October 2008 "offensive behavior" charge following his withdrawal of his denomination from the CCC. Cuban government officials continue to target the "Apostolic Reformation," a non-political religious "movement" that has attracted pastors from several CCC denominations. The "movement" reports that in 2009 and 2010, more than 100 of its members were detained for short periods of time. In addition, over the last year, members were targeted for job losses, evictions, destruction of meeting places, confiscation of religious materials, and discrimination. An Apostolic Reformation pastor remains in prison under a six-year sentence for illicit economic activity and falsification of documents imposed in April 2009—the longest sentence handed down to a religious leader in decades. A video was

released showing the chief interlocutor between religious communities and the Cuban government describing government plans to continue to target the Apostolic Reformation, because it refuses to register, by confiscating homes, houses of worship, and religious materials, as well as withholding visas from co-religionists.

Restrictions on Religious Communities: Protestant and Evangelical communities new to Cuba in the past few decades have been denied permission to build houses of worship. As a result, many of these registered and unregistered communities hold services in “house churches,” private homes or similar accommodations. In response to their growth and lack of oversight, in 2005 the government implemented Directive 43 and Resolution 46, which requires all house churches to register and submit to the government detailed information on their membership, the house church’s inhabitants, and the schedule of services. The law permits no more than three meetings to be held per week, bars foreign citizens from participating in services without government permission, and requires house churches of the same denomination to be at least two kilometers apart. In 2009, the State Department reported that 2,400 of the 4,500 house churches that have applied have been registered.

Improvements: Positive developments for the Catholic Church and major registered Protestant denominations, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, continued over the last year. Despite difficulties in acquiring building materials due to government oversight of construction projects, most religious denominations reported an improved ability to obtain government permission to repair or restore existing churches, and in some cases construct new buildings on the foundations of old ones. In September 2010, construction of a Catholic Church seminary was completed. The State Department reports that religious communities were given greater freedom to discuss politically sensitive issues. Religious denominations reported increased opportunities to conduct some humanitarian and charity work, receive contributions from co-religionists outside Cuba, and obtain Bibles and other religious materials. Small, local processions continued to occur in the provinces in 2010. The government granted the Cuban Council of Churches time for periodic broadcasts early Sunday mornings, and Cuba’s Roman Catholic Cardinal read a Christmas and Easter message on state-run stations. Additionally, there were fewer reports of illegal house churches being fined, confiscated, or evicted. Raul and Fidel Castro also took steps to reach out to the island’s small Jewish community: Raul Castro celebrated Hanukkah with the community in December 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States and Cuba do not have full diplomatic relations, and U.S.-Cuba policy continues to be dominated by U.S. trade sanctions and the travel embargo on Cuba. The U.S. government’s programs to promote human rights in Cuba do not adequately promote religious freedom. USCIRF recommends that, in addition to demanding that Havana release religious leaders who have been unjustly imprisoned, the U.S. government should:

- Press the Cuban government to meet the following benchmarks concerning religious freedom prior to considering resuming full diplomatic relations with the country: stop further arrests and harassment of clergy and religious leaders; cease interference with religious activities and the internal affairs of religious communities; allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally; revise government policies that restrict religious services in homes or on other personal property; and make public statements, at the highest level, informing security and other personnel that they will be held accountable for actions that violate the human rights of non-violent religious practitioners;
- Use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Cuban activists from harassment and arrest by supporting the development of new technologies, while also immediately distributing proven and field-tested programs to counter censorship; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries, to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with Cuba.

Please see USCIRF’s 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Cuba.